



The Opiate¹ of Exceptionalism²

by SCOTT SHANE

Oct. 19, 2012

IMAGINE a presidential candidate who spoke with blunt honesty about American problems, dwelling on measures by which the United States lags its economic peers.

What might this mythical candidate talk about on the stump? He might vow to turn around the dismal statistics on child poverty, declaring it an outrage that of the 35 most economically advanced countries, [the United States ranks 34th](#), edging out only Romania. He might take on educational achievement, noting that this country comes in only [28th in the percentage of 4-year-olds](#) enrolled in preschool, and at the other end of the scale, [14th in the percentage of 25-to-34-year-olds](#) with a higher education. He might hammer on [infant mortality](#), where the United States ranks worse than 48 other countries and territories, or point out that, contrary to fervent³ popular belief, the United States trails most of Europe, Australia and Canada in [social mobility](#).

The candidate might try to stir up his audience by flipping a familiar campaign trope⁴: America is indeed No. 1, he might declare — [in locking its citizens up](#), with an incarceration⁵ rate far higher than that of the likes of Russia, Cuba, Iran or China; [in obesity](#), easily outweighing second-place Mexico and with nearly 10 times the rate of Japan; [in energy use](#) per person, with double the consumption of prosperous Germany.

How far would this truth-telling candidate get? Nowhere fast. Such a candidate is, in fact, all but unimaginable in our political culture. Of their serious presidential candidates, and even of their presidents, Americans demand constant reassurance that their country, their achievements and their values are extraordinary.

Candidates and presidents generally oblige them, Barack Obama and Mitt Romney included. It is permissible, in the political major leagues, for candidates to talk about big national problems — but only if they promise solutions in the next sentence: Unemployment is too high, so I will create millions of jobs. It is impermissible to dwell on chronic, painful problems, or on statistics that challenge the notion that the United States leads the world — a point made memorably in a tirade by the dyspeptic⁶ anchorman played by Jeff Daniels in the HBO drama “The Newsroom.”

“People in this country want the president to be a cheerleader, an optimist, the herald of better times ahead,” says Robert Dallek, the presidential historian. “It’s almost built into our DNA.”

This national characteristic, often labeled American exceptionalism, may inspire some people and politicians to perform heroically, rising to the level of our self-image. But during a presidential campaign, it can be deeply dysfunctional, ensuring that many major issues are barely discussed. Problems that cannot be candidly described and vigorously debated are unlikely to be addressed seriously. In a country where citizens think of themselves as practical problem-solvers and realists, this aversion⁷ to bad news is a surprising feature of the democratic process.

“I think there’s more of a tendency now than in the past to avoid discussion of serious problems,” says Allan J. Lichtman, a political historian at American University. “It has a pernicious⁸ effect on our politics and on governing, because to govern, you need a mandate⁹. And you don’t get a mandate if you don’t

say what you're going to do.”

American exceptionalism has recently been championed by conservatives, who accuse President Obama of paying the notion insufficient respect. But the self-censorship it produces in politicians is bipartisan, even if it is more pronounced on the left for some issues and the right for others.

FOR instance, Democrats are more loath than Republicans to look squarely at the government debt crisis indisputably looming with the aging of baby boomers and the ballooning cost of Medicare. Republicans are more reluctant than Democrats to acknowledge the rise of global temperatures and its causes and consequences. But both parties, it is fair to say, prefer not to consider either trend too deeply.

Both parties would rather avert their eyes from such difficult challenges — because we, the people, would rather avert our eyes. Talk to any political pro about this phenomenon and one name inevitably comes up: Jimmy Carter, who has become a sort of memento mori¹⁰ for American politicians, like the skulls in Renaissance paintings that reminded viewers of their mortality.

Mr. Carter, they will say, disastrously spoke of a national “crisis of confidence” and failed to project the optimism that Americans demand of their presidents. He lost his re-election bid to sunny Ronald Reagan, who promised “morning in America” and left an indelible¹¹ lesson for candidates of both parties: that voters can be vindictive¹² toward anyone who dares criticize the country and, implicitly¹³, the people.

This is a peculiarly American brand of nationalism. “European politicians exercise much greater freedom to address bluntly the uglier social problems,” says Deborah Lea Madsen, professor of American studies at the University of Geneva. An American politician who speaks too candidly about the country’s faults, she went on to say, risks being labeled with that most devastating of epithets: un-American.

The roots of this American trait are often traced to the famous shipboard sermon the Puritan lawyer John Winthrop preached on his way to help found the Massachusetts Bay Colony nearly five centuries ago.

“We must consider,” he said, “that we shall be as a city upon a hill — the eyes of all people are upon us.” Winthrop’s metaphor has had a long life in American speechifying, prominently quoted by both President John F. Kennedy and Reagan. But if, for Winthrop, the image was something the colony should aspire to, for modern politicians it is often a boast of supposed accomplishment, a way of combating pessimists and asserting American greatness, whatever the facts.

Could a presidential candidate today survive if he promised to wage a war on poverty, as President Lyndon B. Johnson did in 1964? It seems unlikely, and one reason may be that Johnson’s effort fell short, revealing the agonizing difficulty and huge cost of trying to change the lives of the poor.

Indeed, in the current fiscal environment, promising an ambitious effort to reduce poverty or counter global warming might imply big new spending, which is practically and politically anathema¹⁴. And given the increasing professionalization of politics, any candidate troubled by how the United States lags its peers in health or education has plenty of advisers and consultants to warn him never to mention it on the stump.

“Nobody wants to be the one who proposed taking the position that got the candidate in trouble,” says Martha Joynt Kumar, a political scientist at Towson University who studies presidential communications.

Of course, the reason talking directly about serious American problems is risky is that most voters don't like it. Mark Rice, who teaches American studies at St. John Fisher College in Rochester, N.Y., said students often arrived at his classes steeped in the notion that the United States excelled at everything. He started a blog, Ranking America, to challenge their assumptions with a wild assortment of country comparisons, some sober (the United States is No. 1 in small arms ownership) and others less so (the United States is tied for 24th with Nigeria in frequency of sex).

"Sure, we're No. 1 in gross domestic product and military expenditures," Mr. Rice says. "But on a lot of measures of quality of life, the U.S. ranking is far lower. I try to be as accurate as I can and I avoid editorializing¹⁵. I try to complicate their thinking."

Shane, Scott. "The Opiate of Exceptionalism." *New York Times* 19 Oct 2012, Sunday Review The Opinion Pages. Web. 21 Oct. 2012. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/21/sunday-review/candidates-and-the-truth-about-america.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>>.

Glossary: (definitions from Merriam-Webster.com)

- ¹opiate (n) 1: a drug (as morphine or codeine) containing or derived from opium and tending to induce sleep and alleviate pain; *broadly* : [narcotic](#) 2: something that induces rest or inaction or quiets uneasiness
- ²exceptionalism (n) : the condition of being different from the norm; *also* : a theory expounding the exceptionalism especially of a nation or region
- ³fervent (adj) 1: very hot : [glowing](#) 2: exhibiting or marked by great intensity of feeling : [zealous](#) <*fervent* prayers>
- ⁴trope (n) 1 *a* : a word or expression used in a figurative sense : [figure of speech](#) *b* : a common or overused theme or device : [cliché](#) <the usual horror movie *tropes*>
- ⁵incarceration (n) incarcerate (v) 1: to put in prison 2: to subject to confinement
- ⁶dyspeptic (adj) dyspepsia (n) 1: [indigestion](#) 2: ill humor : [disgruntlement](#)
- ⁷aversion (n) *obsolete* 1: the act of turning away 2 *a* : a feeling of [repugnance](#) toward something with a desire to avoid or turn from it <regards drunkenness with *aversion*> *b* : a settled dislike : [antipathy](#) <expressed an *aversion* to parties> *c* : a tendency to [extinguish](#) a behavior or to avoid a thing or situation and especially a usually pleasurable one because it is or has been associated with a [noxious](#) stimulus
- ⁸pernicious (adj) 1: highly [injurious](#) or destructive : [deadly](#) 2 *archaic* : [wicked](#)
- ⁹mandate (n) 1: an authoritative command; *especially* : a formal order from a [superior court](#) or official to an inferior one 2: an authorization to act given to a representative <accepted the *mandate* of the people>
- ¹⁰memento mori (n) : a reminder of mortality; *especially* : [death's-head](#) Origin of MEMENTO MORI: Latin, remember that you must die
- ¹¹indelible (adj) 1*a* : that cannot be removed, washed away, or erased *b* : making marks that cannot easily be removed <an *indelible* pencil> 2 *a* : [lasting](#) <*indelible* memories> *b* : [unforgettable](#), [memorable](#) <an *indelible* performance>
- ¹²vindictive (adj) 1*a* : disposed to seek [revenge](#) : [vengeful](#) *b* : intended for or involving revenge 2: intended to cause anguish or hurt : [spiteful](#)
- ¹³implicitly (adv) implicit (adj) 1*a* : capable of being understood from something else though unexpressed : [implied](#) <an *implicit* assumption> *b* : involved in the nature or [essence](#) of something though not revealed, expressed, or developed : [potential](#) <a sculptor may see different figures *implicit* in a block of stone — John Dewey> *c* of a *mathematical function* : defined by an expression in which the [dependent variable](#) and the one or more [independent variables](#) are not separated on opposite sides of an equation — compare [explicit](#) 4 2 : being without doubt or reserve : [unquestioning](#) <an *implicit* trust>
- ¹⁴anathema (n) 1*a* : one that is cursed by [ecclesiastical](#) (church) authority *b* : someone or something intensely disliked or loathed —usually used as a predicate nominative <this notion was *anathema* to most of his countrymen — S. J. Gould> 2*a* : a ban or curse solemnly pronounced by ecclesiastical authority and accompanied by [excommunication](#) *b* : the denunciation of something as accursed *c* : a vigorous [denunciation](#) : [curse](#)
- ¹⁵editorializing (v) 1: to express an opinion in the form of an [editorial](#) 2: to introduce opinion into the reporting of facts 3: to express an opinion (as on a controversial issue)

What is the author's purpose?

Who is the intended audience?

Using third person, the voice of authority, write a paragraph that explains your point of view about the subject discussed in the editorial. Do not summarize or review the article. Form an opinion about the subject, and explain your viewpoint without using I or you.

What is the subject?

What do you think about the subject?

Combine the answers to these two questions into one sentence. The sentence will be your paragraph's topic sentence. Do not begin with I think.

Why do you have this opinion? Support your point of view with reasons.

Ms. Knuth's Example:

If Americans continue to think that the United States is better than all other countries in the world, the average American's quality of life will continue to decline. Politicians, corporate leaders, and media icons support the popular opinion that America is the greatest nation on earth. This opinion makes and keeps them in power because Americans want to believe it to be true too. It is a circular dilemma that distracts citizens and leaders from important issues. Americans seem to be easily distracted from important issues though, as indicated by the Nielsen ratings for the week of September 24: NFL Football was ranked first among television viewers (<http://www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/top10s/television.html>), and by the most read news stories on nydailynews.com for a time on Sunday, October 21: 1. "Victims of Lance Armstrong's strong-arm tactics feel relief and vindication in the wake of U.S. Anti-Doping Agency report" (<http://www.nydailynews.com/sports/more-sports/zone-lance-armstrong-bully-downfall-article-1.1188512>), and 2. "Kanye West and Kim Kardashian getting married? Ryan Seacrest hints rapper might propose this weekend" (<http://www.nydailynews.com/entertainment/gossip/kanye-propose-kim-weekend-ryan-seacrest-article-1.1188251>) The problems that the country must resolve exist regardless of world leadership status or American's attentiveness, and these problems will impact all Americans. If Americans continue to support the arrogant neglect of politicians and corporate leaders, economic and environmental disasters will ultimately lead to America's downfall. Environmental changes are occurring globally and socio-economic status will not shield citizens from supercell damage. Those with money will recover from such disasters and continue to live the style of the rich and famous, but those without financial means will experience significant loss. If Americans don't shift their attention from popular pats on the back to solving problems within the basic infrastructure, America and average American's lifestyles will continue to decline.

Write your viewpoint below. Remember to use third person.